DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 556 CS 208 277

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TITLE Helping Students Understand Process.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (35th, New York City, NY, March 29-31, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum Enrichment; *Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Exercises; Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Awareness

ABSTRACT

To force students--at the very beginning of the writing process--to be aware of audience and to gain insight into their own writing, in-class writing and sharing exercises can be invaluable. For example, students can present to the class their subject for an upcoming paper, with the class responding on paper to such questions as: (1) What do you expect to find in the article? (2) What didn't you hear about in the presentation that you would have liked to have heard about? (3) What people do you want to hear about or from? and (4) What don't you want to hear about? Students can exchange written responses and then begin researching and writing with a notion of the importance of audience and its expectations regarding information and details. Similar exercises can be done in the prewriting, drafting, and final draft stages of a paper. A most effective exercise is having the students write a brief note to add to a paper answering the question: If you had twenty-four more hours to work on your paper, what would you do with it? The teacher can then respond in a personal and positive way to this short postscript. Students can ultimately learn several things, among them that it is better at first to produce many words as opposed to a few, that it is advantageous to write continuously rather than at the last minute, and that it helps to have someone else interact with them during all stages of the writing process. (CRH)

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Helping Students Understand Process

Over the years I have found a practical way to give my students perspective on the writing they are doing as they are doing it, a method that helps them understand the writing process. What I do is quite simple. At each stage of the process--from beginning to end, from finding a topic to revising a final draft--I stop my students and ask them to answer certain questions or to complete certain statements. "A paper is due in a week," I announce at the beginning of the process. I may follow this with, "This time you get to choose your own topic." Groans, panic. What am I going to write about? "Take out a piece of paper," I say. "Now, quickly, without thinking too much about it, complete each of the following statements. Statement number one. 'The thing I know the most about--in fact, I'm even a kind of authority on--is....' Fill in the blank. Number two. 'Something that has always fascinated me is....' Number three. 'Something I'd like to write on but don't think I know enough about is....'" And so on, for as many statements as I can come up with--sometimes a dozen or more. Statements like these help my students, at the beginning of the writing process, to take an inventory of what they know and what they want to find out more about and thus to find something to write on.

Or I may give them a topic. Let's say I tell my freshmen to write about someone who has made a significant impression on them. Before actually making the assignment, I ask them to close their eyes and to

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think of such a person. "Write down his or her name," I tell them. "Now, write down the name of someone else who has made an impression on you. A third person." At this point I ask them to read their list to the student sitting next to them, telling their partner something about each person whose name they have written down. After this brief exchange has taken place I tell the students to ask their partners which of the three people they've heard about sounds the most interesting. Each student is then to stick with that person for the rest of the exercise.

The next step may be to write down an item of clothing that the person wears frequently. "Her nightgown," writes my student Luanne, who as her significant person has chosen her mother. "It's old and all worn out," she goes on; "...it's [actually] an old muumuu." Then she adds, "She hates to wear a dress because then she has to wear pantyhose." "Tell me something your person is proud of," I may ask next. "Her jewelry," writes Luanne; "she likes her jade." Other information or details that I sometimes request include: something your person doesn't have, but wants; some habit your person has and how you react to that habit; some special interest or hobby. I also ask questions like these: "Where could I find your person on a Saturday night? How about on a Sunday morning? Think of a time you spent together; what are you doing? what are you talking about?" I usually get the students to develop the scene a little by asking them to write down where they were and why they were there.

When they are through, they read what they have written to the person sitting next to them (I may have them do this several times during the

exercise if the exercise is a long one). This is a common feature of all such exercises--my students write, then share; write, then share. Forced at the very beginning of the writing process to make themselves understood and to consider what others want to know--what others' expectations are--my students learn to pay attention to audience. And hearing other people read what they have written sometimes gives them new ideas, even inspires them. Often--and this is important--they learn that their own ideas aren't as bad as they thought they were. Furthermore, with everyone in the classroom doing short bursts of writing and sharing them with one another--usually with a different partner for each exercise--a kind of positive energy is created, an energy that takes the drudgery out of getting started and makes students want to go on.

The statements that I ask my freshman to respond to as they prepare to write about someone who has made a significant impression on them lead them to look into their memory and see the person. But does this early writing help them produce a better final essay? I think so. Many of the details that come up on their lists find their way into their essays, enriching their prose. The exercise is useful in other ways, too. It often helps students find out if they have chosen the right subject. For example, when I asked Luanne and her classmates to write down what they had got out of doing the exercise for finding material on a significant person in their lives, Luanne said she had learned that she had to change her subject because "what I was saying was too personal"--an important discovery and one that she made early rather than at the last minute. Another student wrote that he had got out of the exercise good

background for the paper, "a sort of outline in my mind." Someone discovered that he didn't really know enough about the person he'd chosen and had to interview him before he could write his paper. On the other hand, someone else said he was pleased to find out "how much I actually knew about my friend Wesley." Several were amazed that they were able to recall things that happened a long time ago. One person was surprised to learn "that there were a lot of things to write about." Another confessed "that I got started sooner than I would have."

This kind of exercise also works for courses beyond freshman English in helping students to produce words and thinking on more difficult topics. It helps students recover experience--their experience of a literary work, for example. In a recent sophomore introduction-to-literature class I asked the students to write papers that would help me decide whether to reorder for the following semester the collection of Flannery O'Connor stories we had just finished reading. Many had not liked the stories, had found them hard to understand, had found O'Connor's world strange--"weird" was their word for it--though most had nevertheless been affected by what they had read, disturbed by it. Before I passed out the assignment, I asked the students to write brief answers to a few questions. The first was "Which story has stuck most vividly in your memory?" The next was, "Which character do you remember best?" I asked them to come up with a reason why students in Hawaii should have to read these stories. And why they shouldn't. I asked them to describe quickly their typical first response to an O'Connor story: What went through their minds? What did they feel? Here, in part, is

what one of my students wrote: "After finishing each story I was dissatisfied with the feeling I was left with. They all ended on the same dismal note! [But] if I didn't really like them, why did I read more than I had to?" This student also wrote: "...the feeling I had while reading [the stories] was much like the [one] I experienced when [I visited] a home for the mentally ill.... I remember walking down a long corridor filled with people wandering aimlessly with blank staring eyes. I was distracted by a patient banging his head repeatedly against a wall. Suddenly another patient ran up to me, his face inches away from mine, and screamed, 'Water, give me water....' It was an eerie and strange place, and I was ashamed at my curiosity. That was how I felt about the stories. I couldn't relate to any of the characters or their situations. I just wanted to satisfy my curiosity."

By the end of this exercise, this student and the others in her class already had a paper in the works, and much of the writing that they did in the exercise found its way into the final draft. To prepare my students in another sophomore literature class to write a short paper on the end of The Grapes of Wrath, I asked them to recall where they were when they read the last scene. Were they sitting in a chair or lying down? What time of day was it? And so on. After giving them several minutes to answer these questions, I said: "Now, writing as fast as you can, describe what was happening in you as you read the end of the novel." This exercise seems to allow students to find their own voices and to talk about a literary work in terms of their experience of it. In most cases they are able to carry over that natural style to the prose of

the paper itself. Here is what one of my students wrote on her final paper:

> I kept thinking about [the scene in the barn] for days afterward, trying to figure out what it meant. At first it horrified me. I kept thinking that if I was Rose of Sharon and just had a child, I wouldn't want to have to give its milk away to an old man. When Ma looked at Rose of Sharon I didn't know what she meant. I couldn't guess. Then when she just naturally knew what Ma meant and went about the task with no reservations I had to re-examine my thinking. Why did I find this [act] so repulsive? Maybe it is because I've never really been in that situation before and could not see in the light of such hunger that Rose of Sharon's sharing her milk with a dying man is beautiful. I didn't understand that this kind of action is just what Tom was talking about: the single person sacrificing self for the whole group. If only Tom [had been there] to see his sister's mysterious smile.

Kevin is a student in my senior-level nonfiction writing course this semester. By the second meeting of the class he already knew what he was going to write his long article on--"fantasy wargaming." It would be a two-part paper, he explained to the class: part one would be about his involvement and how he had moved from board play to simulated battlefield play; part two would be about the lessons he had learned from playing such wargames. He mentioned the names of a few people he would probably interview--several of his friends and the manager of the local store that sold wargames.

When he was through with his brief presentation, I asked the other members of the class to write down quickly the answers to four questions: What do you expect to find in Kevin's article on wargaming? What didn't you hear about in his presentation that you would have liked to have heard about? What people do you want to hear about or from? What don't you want to hear about?

The questions produced a variety of responses. The class expected to learn what kind of games Kevin was talking about; how he had gotten started playing them; how the games themselves had originated; the kinds of people who play them; where the public could observe such games in action. They wanted to hear from a psychologist who could analyze people who play the games and from someone who hated them. Some were afraid that he was talking about video games and they emphatically did not want to hear about them.

The other students presented their ideas for their papers in the same way. Then Kevin and his classmates took the written responses to their ideas home and went to work. When they returned a week later, I asked them to comment in another exercise on their reactions to the feedback they had received. "What went through your mind when you read your feedback?" I asked. "What was the most useful thing you got from it? What was the least useful? What specific use did you make of the feedback in producing the writing you produced for today?" Kevin wrote that the most important thing the feedback had told him was that most people didn't even know what he meant by fantasy wargames, and so the first thing he had done was to write three pages describing the

role-playing aspect of Dungeons and Dragons. As he read these pages, the notion began to emerge that these games were, for him, a grown-up passion, complex and strange.

After getting the feedback from this particular exercise many in the class seemed to become aware--for the first time--of the importance of a writer's audience and its expectations. "I [now] know what they want," said one student. Usually what they wanted was more information and more details. Several people in the class said that the responses had forced them to find a sharper forcus or even to change their topic altogether. Some testified to the encouragement they had received from others; they had been surprised that other people were really interested in what they planned to write about. Anything anyone in class wanted to know more about was, I suggested to Kevin and his classmates, probably something that someone in the outside world would want to know more about too.

I have similar exercises for the next stage of the writing process, the drafting stage--exercises that are designed to keep the ball rolling. The class period after the students have done the directed brainstorming exercises I have been describing I may ask them to write down some idea they've had about their topic in the last two days (some thought that has crossed their mind, something they have remembered, etc.). Then I may ask them to write a dialogue between themselves and someone they're close to; the other person begins the dialogue with this question: "Why are you writing on <u>that</u> subject?" This part of the exercise is designed to get them to articulate their purpose.

My students always bring their completed drafts to class and read them aloud in peer evaluation groups. But often, before they do, I have them do an exercise designed to help them pinpoint weak spots and problems in their drafts and locate strengths. When forced to stand back and examine their writing, students are usually honest and perceptive judges. In this exercise I ask such questions as "What was the biggest problem you've had so far? How have you solved it? (If you haven't solved the problem, what happened?) If I were to read your paper right now, what would be the first thing I'd say about it? If I were going to say something really nice about it, what would it be? On the basis of the comments I've written on your previous three papers, what would I write on this one?" Sometimes I get quite specific. "List three important details in your paper," I will ask. Or "Look at your opening sentence. On a scale of from 1 to 10, with 10 being high, where would you place that sentence? If you had to add something to this paper, what would it be? If you had to cut something, what would it be?" Typical answers to this last question are "[I'd cut] the scene in the room--I thought it was boring" and "[I'd cut] my intro--the first few lines, anyway. They don't sound right somehow." At the end of this exercise I will often ask: "What do you need to do to your paper between now and [the day it's due]? How long will that take?"

On the day the paper is due, I have my students do one final exercise, one that's designed to allow them to step back from the paper and let it go. This exercise helps them clear their heads and allows us to move on to something new. I ask them such things as: "If you had

twenty-four more hours to work on your paper, what--if anything--would you do with it? How about if you had an hour?" "Tell me something you learned about yourself as you wrote your paper." "Is there anything you would like to tell me about the assignment or your paper?" "What grade do you think your paper deserves?" Unlike the earlier exercises, which my students keep and I rarely see, this one is turned in with their papers and I read it after I have marked those papers. Reading what students have written about their work is a kind of bonus. Having finished marking a paper, I can relax for a moment and read what they thought about their work, where it was strong and where weak. I can find out what they got out of doing the assignment. It's as if I were reading short letters from them, postscripts to their papers. Usually I add a short, quick note of my own, letting them know I have heard what they said.

This last exercise was actually the first one I developed; I wrote about it sever years ago for one of the NCTE Classroom Practices books ("An Excersise for the Day Papers Are Due" in Activating the Passive Student: Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1978-79, ed. Gene Stanford [Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1978], pp. 84-86). Only slowly, during the years that followed, did I learn that if such exercises are written during the composing process itself they are even more useful, because they help writers when they need help the most.

My students get more out of doing these exercises than "Writer's Wrist," though even the constant writing practice they get would be reason enough for me to continue. Most learn that it is better to

produce a lot of words than a few (at least in first drafts), that it is better to be writing all along than only at the last minute--that there are real advantages to starting early, to letting things percolate and develop naturally. They learn that it helps to read their words aloud to others, to have someone else there all along listening to what they are writing, hearing it in all its stages, rough and polished. Besides, doing the exercises gets to be fun. Toward the end of a semester, I will sometimes say to a class, "I'll bet you know what I'm going to say next." And they grin and shout back to me in unison, "Take out a piece of paper!"